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Chairman: Mr. Matute (Vice-President) ..... (Peru)

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In the absence of the Chairman, Mr. Matute (Peru), Vice-Chairman, took the Chair.

The meeting was called to order at 3.10 p.m.

Agenda item 100: Environment and sustainable development (*continued*)

(b) International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (*continued*) (A/54/132-E/1999/80, A/54/132/Add.1-E/1999/80/Add.1, A/54/135-E/1999/88, A/54/136-E/1999/89, A/54/497; A/C.2/54/4)

1. **Mr. Anaedu** (Nigeria), having associated his delegation with the statement made by the representative of Guyana on behalf of the Group of 77 and China, said that it was necessary to assess the achievements made and difficulties encountered since the proclamation of the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction in 1989. The evaluation should be a continuation of the mid-term review undertaken in 1994 by the Economic and Social Council and the World Conference on Natural Disaster Reduction held in Yokohama, Japan. The mid-term review had been a starting point for the introduction of new strategies for the second half of the Decade and had identified three key targets: integration of national assessment of risks from natural disasters into mitigation plans for long-term disaster prevention, community awareness and preparation; and access to global, regional and local early warning systems.

2. Efforts had been made to establish structures and policies that would allow the Decade's objectives to be attained. Such efforts had resulted in increased awareness of the risks associated with natural disasters, and national disaster-reduction policies, plans and strategies had been developed that included mitigation and prevention measures. Despite such efforts, the number of natural disasters had risen with increasingly devastating effects, owing to interrelated factors such as the large numbers of extremely poor people living in high-risk areas, and the exposure of infrastructure and crucial lifeline systems to the effects of disasters and environmental degradation. Such factors were exacerbated by shortsighted international trade and financial practices, the unsustainable external debt burden, uncontrolled economic growth, particularly in urban areas, and the growing inequality among countries.

3. Africa, in particular, had suffered from natural and other disasters that had wreaked catastrophic effects on its economies and human and material resources. Nigeria had suffered from tropical storms, land erosion, forest fires, windstorms, floods, drought, desertification and landslides. Flooding affected more than 20 per cent of the population in both urban and rural areas. In recent years, flooding had become an increasingly alarming phenomenon that had left many homeless and without any means of subsistence. Furthermore, more than 8 per cent of the total land area of Nigeria suffered from soil erosion. There was also widespread coastal erosion, and it was estimated that the shoreline was receding between 2 and 30 metres each year. The consequences of such disasters on exposed areas had been horrendous.

4. The Nigerian Government had responded by adopting national disaster-reduction plans and policies and the necessary institutional framework, including a National Emergency Management Authority. The new democratic Government of Nigeria had also strengthened environmental coordination by creating a Ministry of the Environment.

5. Like most developing countries, however, Nigeria could not implement its national policies and strategies due to lack of technical know-how, adequate resources and the capacity to mobilize the few that were available. Most developing countries had neither the modern means of telecommunications and information networks to take part in early warning systems nor the rapid response mechanism needed to provide emergency assistance and evacuate the affected population. Consequently, Nigeria urged the international community to adopt concrete measures to strengthen the capacity of developing countries for disaster-reduction planning and management and to promote and facilitate the transfer of early warning technologies to such countries. Action plans should be prepared that would enable developing countries over the next five years, to attain the goals and targets of the Decade that had just concluded and to carry out yearly assessments.

6. Lastly, Nigeria fully supported the Secretary-General's recommendation that an intergovernmental panel or commission should be set up with emphasis on disaster prevention and the development and implementation of coherent policies, taking advantage of the synergetic effect among institutions dedicated to natural disaster reduction, and creating the necessary capacity in developing countries to effectively prevent and manage natural disasters in the twenty-first century.

7. **Mr. García González** (El Salvador) said he associated himself with the statement made by the representative of Guyana on behalf of the Group of 77 and China. The international community had made considerable progress in understanding the mechanics of natural disasters thanks to the efforts of the scientific community and the increase in

worldwide attention to the need to reduce or prevent the risks of natural disasters and mitigate their effects. That was especially true in view of the principal objective of the Decade, namely, to reduce the casualties, material damage and social and economic disturbances caused by natural disasters, particularly in developing countries.

8. Among the achievements of the Decade, it was worth mentioning the World Conference on Natural Disaster Reduction, held in Yokohama in May 1994, when the achievements of each country were reviewed, a strategy and action plan were prepared and a decision was taken to intensify the exchange of information on the implementation of the programmes and activities of the Decade and increase awareness of the importance of disaster-reduction policies. During the Conference, it was decided to incorporate new strategies into the second half of the Decade, characterized particularly by the importance accorded to social sciences, the pre-eminence of official policies, the preparation of regional and subregional approaches, the change in emphasis from disaster preparedness to reduction of vulnerability and risks, and the new significance of science and technology as applied to disaster reduction. The International Conference on Early Warning Systems for the Reduction of Natural Disaster, held in Potsdam, Germany, in September 1998, was also extremely important; the follow-up activities to that Conference focused on the preparation of an action plan and specific guidelines to establish an integrated, interdisciplinary and multisectoral approach combining the sociological, economic, political, organizational, scientific and technical aspects.

9. On 24 October 1998, Hurricane Mitch had descended on the Caribbean and Central America making its effects felt in Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua. The hurricane had had a devastating impact which had been aggravated by factors such as demographic pressure, which had resulted in widespread deforestation, and the cultivation of marginal land without appropriate soil conservation methods; the poorest sectors of the population had been most affected. That situation had led the Central American countries to conclude unanimously that the recovery process must include activities aimed at changing the social and economic conditions that were the cause of the region's ecological and social vulnerability. It had also strengthened the conviction that prevention was essential; since the United Nations had already been working on prevention in the region, it had been able to respond immediately, taking advantage of its presence in the field and of the existence of medicine, food and other needed supplies. His Government wished to convey its deepest appreciation to the United Nations and, in particular, to the then Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator and his staff.

10. His Government agreed with the Secretary-General that it was important to develop a culture of prevention rather than continuing to strengthen the current culture of response. In the medium and long term, it was essential to strengthen programmes designed to reduce the number and cost of disasters.

11. In its resolution 1999/63 of 30 July 1999, the Economic and Social Council had recognized the importance of early warning as an integrated process at all levels, including hazard monitoring and impact prediction, technology development and transfer, capacity-building for the detection of hazards, as well as the issuance and communication of early warnings, education and professional training, public information and awareness raising, and interface between the public and private sectors. It also reiterated the importance of fully integrating natural disaster reduction into the sustainable development strategies of the United Nations and of other international organizations. That integration process was a fundamental aspect of the development of early warning systems at the regional and subregional levels, as recognized in the final declaration of the Summit between the Heads of State and Government of Latin America and the Caribbean and the European Union, held in Rio de Janeiro in July 1999, and the coordination activities carried out by the Central American Commission for Environment and Development in cooperation with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) and the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO).

12. The success of that process would depend on the availability of adequate financial resources to guarantee the development and implementation of prevention and mitigation programmes in all countries, particularly the developing countries. His Government appealed to all members of the international community to consider ensuring that at least 10 per cent of all funds allocated to natural disaster management were invested in prevention programmes and activities by 2005.

13. **Mr. Seki** (Japan) said that Japan had endeavoured to promote the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction by, *inter alia*, providing human resources to the secretariat of the Decade and hosting the World Conference on Natural Disaster Reduction in 1994.

14. All the nations of the world should cooperate in disaster mitigation in order to achieve sustainable

development. For that reason, Japan had been actively involved, through technical cooperation, loans, grant assistance and international emergency relief assistance, in international efforts to reduce the damage caused by disasters; it considered that concerted international efforts for disaster reduction would remain necessary even after the conclusion of the programme of the Decade. The international community must promote the achievements of the Decade and continue to share experiences and disaster prevention technology in order to make further progress in mitigating the damage caused by natural disasters. Japan, for its part, would continue its efforts to prevent and mitigate such damage.

15. **Mr. Zarie Zare** (Islamic Republic of Iran) associated himself with the statement made by the representative of Guyana on behalf of the Group of 77 and China and said that the frequency and severity of natural disasters throughout the world had increased sharply in recent decades. The consequences of those disasters had undermined national efforts to promote economic development and achieve higher living standards, particularly in the developing countries. In many developing countries, annual losses associated with such disasters approached 5 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP), surpassing the growth rates of some of them and wiping out or substantially reducing economic growth and sustainable development. In 1998 alone, natural disasters had claimed the lives of more than 50,000 people and caused economic losses exceeding US$ 90 billion; furthermore, there had been a significant rising trend in those losses, which had been almost three times greater in the current decade than in the previous one. The General Assembly had decided to proclaim the 1990s the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction and had approved the functional platform and institutional base for the Decade and a 10-year programme of action that included guidelines and strategies for reducing the loss of life and property damage caused by such disasters. It had also endorsed the development of measures for their assessment, prediction, prevention and mitigation.

16. As the Decade was drawing to a close, the time had come to assess the institutional developments that had taken place and decide on successor arrangements for it. The Secretary-General's report on that topic (A/54/497) presented the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction as a framework for the future activities of the United Nations in that area, focusing mainly on the adoption of preventive measures and the use of scientific, technical and socio-economic knowledge to ensure capacity-building at the international, regional, national and community levels to address the devastating impact of natural disasters.

17. While medium- and long-term disaster-reduction activities should be directed at creating a culture of prevention, short-term policies and practices to mitigate the immediate negative impact of natural disasters must also be an integral part of any strategy. The participation of non-governmental organizations and civil society could facilitate the achievement of the Strategy's goals and promote public awareness and participation at all levels. The Government's role in any disaster reduction strategy was also important in both policy-making and policy implementation; nevertheless, problems arising from natural disasters could most effectively be addressed through government cooperation with civil society and the private sector.

18. The inter-agency task force which was to serve as the main forum within the United Nations system for devising disaster-reduction strategies and policies should draw on the experiences and the success of the functional and organizational arrangements established for the implementation of the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction. Greater coordination and cooperation with Governments should be encouraged through dialogue that could pave the way for the creation of a comprehensive framework for policy-making and policy implementation at the international level. Disaster reduction should be considered a cross-cutting issue in the follow-up to the outcomes of major United Nations conferences, in particular those on social development and human settlements, and interaction should be set up and strengthened between the existing coordination mechanisms of the United Nations system and the new inter-agency task force. The inter-agency secretariat should be given adequate resources to deal with the various aspects of natural disasters and should be endowed with the capacity to fulfil its role of coordination and meet the challenges it would be facing.

19. The Islamic Republic of Iran was one of the countries most prone to natural disasters, particularly earthquakes. The Government, in cooperation with civil society and the private sector, had developed policies to raise public awareness and taken steps to mitigate the socio-economic effects of disasters. The role of youth in related programmes had been strengthened, especially through training in the high schools and the activities of the Youth Organization of the Red Crescent Society. As early as 1991 the Government had approved the formation of a national committee for the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction, including representatives from various ministries, the Iran Institute of Geology and the Red Crescent Society of Iran. It had also been decided that the activities of the national committee would continue beyond the close of the Decade at the end of 1999.

20. **Mr. Oratmangun** (Indonesia) said that his delegation supported the statement made by the representative of Guyana on behalf of the Group of 77 and China. It was discouraging to note that natural disasters had intensified and economic losses from such disasters had risen by a factor of nine since 1960. It was even more disconcerting to note that much of the loss of life and destruction of property could have been avoided or lessened if known strategies to counter the impact of various types of natural disasters had been implemented. At present, the international community's humanitarian assistance efforts were geared to post-disaster support. A better balance should be struck by increasing the focus on the prevention of natural disasters and their effects.

21. His delegation was encouraged by the positive measures adopted in support of the Decade's goals and objectives, including the creation of the Inter-Agency Task Force on El Niño, an instance of effective cooperation among different sectors and agencies, and hoped that similar measures could be adopted in the future.

22. The loss of life and damage to property caused by natural disasters was to a large extent due to poverty and underdevelopment, which hindered planning and implementation of disaster-reduction strategies. The situation was aggravated, in the present era of globalization, by the fact that multilateral cooperation for development was under extreme pressure. Although it was important to develop disaster-reduction strategies designed to respond to the possible evolution of natural hazards, a task that would be greatly facilitated by the new technological tools, without greater cooperation for development and poverty eradication the prospects for major improvements were not promising. At the same time a culture of prevention should also be encouraged, since experience had shown that where programmes of prevention and preparedness for natural disasters had been in place, loss of life and property had been considerably reduced.

23. Both short- and long-term prevention strategies were needed to reduce the vulnerability of societies. In the short term, preventive measures such as early warning systems, contingency plans and construction codes for buildings in disaster-prone areas should be adopted. In the longer term, disaster-reduction strategies should be included in overall development programmes, whose success would largely depend on broad-based cross-sectoral cooperation. Programmes of humanitarian assistance, prevention and preparedness prior to natural disasters could be very cost-effective compared with the cost of humanitarian assistance and reconstruction after the fact.

24. It was crucial that the momentum in establishing and evolving natural disaster reduction programmes should be sustained and the lessons learned over the years fully utilized. His delegation therefore strongly supported the proposal of the secretariat of the International Decade that future arrangements for natural disaster prevention should include the establishment of an inter-agency secretariat and an inter-agency task force.

The meeting rose at 3.50 p.m.